Component I: Ecotype Focus Areas of Greatest Conservation Need

"This is a strategy to focus resources and efforts toward geographical areas where they can benefit the largest number of species and communities in need of conservation."

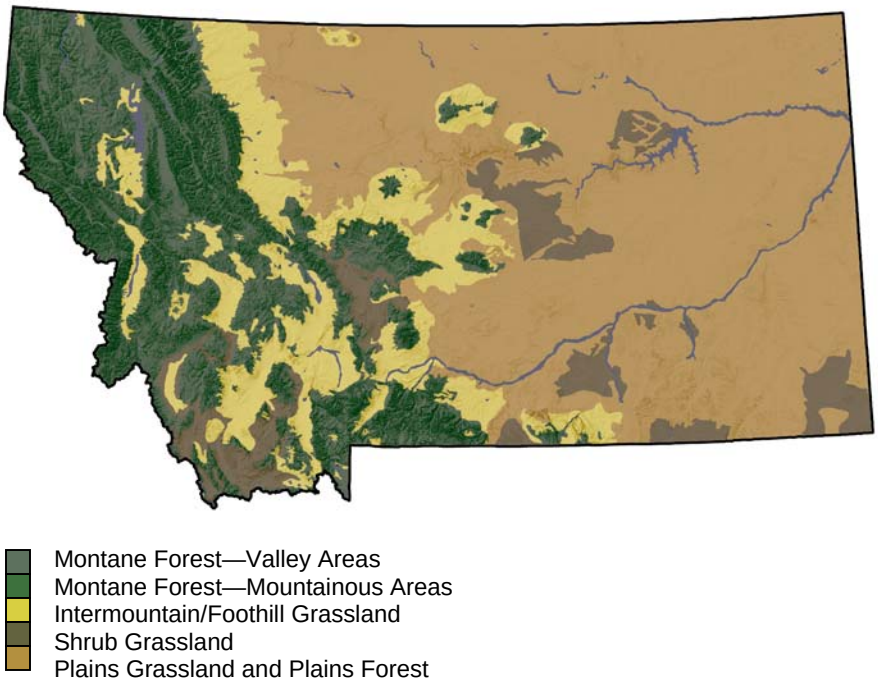

Figure 1. Ecotypes of Montana

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) habitat programs currently use five ecotypes to describe the broad areas of Montana's landscape that have similar characteristics: intermountain/foothill grassland, montane forest, plains grassland, plains forest, shrub grassland, and riparian (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks 1991). For the Strategy, we combined the plains grassland and plains forest into one ecotype. We also defined riparian as a community type instead of an ecotype since it occurs throughout all of the other ecotypes.

Within each of the ecotypes, Tier I (greatest need of conservation) geographic focus areas were identified for all terrestrial and aquatic areas of the state (Apendices H and I). Due to their biological characteristics, aquatic and terrestrial focus areas were identified separately to facilitate implementation of conservation strategies, with the understanding that overlap does exist. For example, there is a Tier I focus area for the terrestrial Bitterroot Valley and also a Tier I focus area for the Bitteroot River. Although these systems occur in the same geographic area, management and conservation efforts often occur separately.

Only the areas in greatest need of conservation are described in the body of the Strategy. These areas guide our attention to locations that offer some of the best opportunity to conserve Montana's community types and fish and wildlife species in greatest need of conservation. Because stewardship (federal, tribal, state, and private ownership) was considered when assessing areas in greatest conservation need, many of the areas identified as Tier I are located on private land. Much of this private land occurs in the eastern portion of Montana. Within each focus area description, the habitats and species of greatest conservation need are listed for each area along with conservation concerns and strategies. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, along with other state and federal agencies, private organizations, and the public, should leverage existing programs to conserve these areas. Specific agencies, organizations, or individuals will be effective at implementing many of the conservation strategies. However, due to the large amount of private land, landowner based and collaborative projects also should be encouraged. Conservation efforts that are under way by various groups that address the conservation strategies should be supported. In some cases working groups might need to be initiated to begin addressing conservation concerns. A good model for how working groups could operate is the Blackfoot Challenge. The Blackfoot Challenge is a Montana group that coordinates management of the Blackfoot River, its tributaries, and adjacent lands. It is organized locally and known nationally as a model for preserving the rural character and natural beauty of a watershed and surrounding areas. Although its charter dates to 1993, Blackfoot landowners have played an instrumental stewardship role since the late 1970s—bringing conservation easement legislation, walk-in hunting areas, and recreation corridor management to Montana. The Blackfoot Challenge can be contacted at Blackfoot Challenge, PO Box 103, Ovando, MT 59854, 406-793-3900.

Many wide-ranging species depend upon habitat connectivity for the long-term health of their populations. Although some information about fish and wildlife corridors can be found, it is typically focused on a single species or a limited area such as the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). A statewide, mapable assessment of important linkage areas does exist (American Wildlands Cooridors Map, 2003); however, conservation concerns such as habitat fragmentation and loss of connectivity occur at a wide variety of scales. Therefore, we did not address broad connectivity concerns in the initial assessment, but did so within each individual focus area and community type and for specific species. In the future, FWP and its partners should work to address concerns about the loss of important areas of fish and wildlife habitat connectivity.